



88 ❖ Athanase Musende's last pastoral visit

Pastor Athanase Musende's voice on the other end of the call early in Easter week 2012 was quiet, yet urgent. "I can't walk!" Helpless in the face of his troubling medical condition and the distance separating us, I could only appeal to the Great Physician.

"We'll pray for you," I offered, overwhelmed with the significance of the fact that he had called me. Two years of trying to get help for him had not yielded the results we had hoped for. He was suffering from severe heart disease.

"Thank you!" he said simply, and then the call was dropped. I tried again and again to call back but couldn't make the connection between Kinshasa, where I was, and Pastor Musende in Kamayala, where I had known him since my childhood as the daughter of missionaries Ben and Helen Eidse.

Later I was on the phone with Wenyi Nzey', an elder of the congregation, and I asked about Pastor Musende. Could he walk?

"He's still walking, but with difficulty," said Wenyi.

However, a few days later, at 12:30 on Holy Saturday morning, April 7, Pastor Musende died in his footsteps, so to speak. He had given the Easter week seminars every day at the Kamayala church, expounding the death and resurrection of Christ, comparing it with the human experience of death. "You have to endure suffering in

photo—Athanase Musende (first adult on left), with friends Denis Kamanda, Malula Kutaha, and Jacques Kamanda

order to experience resurrection,” he said, and cited the account of Joseph and his brothers.

“He spoke with special insight, as if from personal experience,” said Wenyi Nzey’. “He interspersed the teaching with songs filled with pathos. We were astounded and moved to tears.”

Wenyi reported that after the Kamalaya Good Friday service, Pastor Musende had borrowed his motorbike to visit a village four kilometers away, administered baptism and communion, and then returned home. “During the week he told me once that he couldn’t sleep at night and wondered if he would live until morning,” Wenyi told me. “We realize now that God extended his life through this week so he could impart this teaching.” The news of his death shook the region and the Mennonite Church of Congo (CMCo) community. Pastor Musende was in his late fifties.

Justin Mbuyuyu, son of a pastor who had worked with my father, was the new pastor of that village. The baptismal candidates were the first fruits of his ministry. Justin spoke passionately of his vision for growth in the village and church. “I know I have resisted becoming a pastor my whole life,” he told me. “I never wanted to be poor like my parents were. But I know now that this is my calling. I am ready to follow Christ, no matter what the sacrifice.” Pastor Musende’s last sacrificial act, his taking each painful step in order to administer baptism in Justin’s congregation, will have an enduring result.

Pastor Musende was a repository of history, Chokwe culture, and language. A nephew of pastor Emmanuel Wayindama,¹ he knew all the original pastors, their gifts, and works. He was an expert in Anabaptist theology, a skilled peacemaker. He was a calm man of few words and a ready smile. Whenever he did speak, it was with wisdom and insight. He served Kamayala and Kahemba districts as a Bible institute professor, a high school teacher, and a key pastor and spiritual leader. He did not seek high position or power and had turned down the nomination as head of the district. A singer with a beautiful voice, he was the one who knew all the songs in the Chokwe hymn book.

In spite of his heavy teaching and preaching load, Pastor Musende farmed and worked hard in his dry-season market gardens.

1 See “A small man of giant wisdom” (chapter 24), and “That’s all you can do to me” (chapter 26).

He provided for his wife and extended family. He was a loving husband, father, friend, and mentor, a victorious and dedicated Christian.

“One thing in particular stands out about him,” said Wenyi. “He never despaired, even in these last years of suffering.”

In his death as in his life, Pastor Musende Uthu Naweji Athanase demonstrated the transcendent power of the resurrection. As we stood on the threshold of heaven on Easter weekend, we relinquished our brother to the One who gives and who takes away. We persevered to say, “I know that my Redeemer lives!”

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